

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PANAMA 00159 071817Z

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SUBJECT: BANANA WORKERS' UNION AFFILIATES WITH COMMUNIST LABOR
CONFEDERATION

REF: PANAMA 0129

SUMMARY: PANAMANIAN BANANA WORKERS' UNIONS QUIETLY AFFILIATED
WITH COMMUNIST-DOMINATED NATIONAL LABOR CONFEDERATION (CNTF)
IN NOVEMBER; CNTF HAS SINCE MADE SOME LOW-KEY PUBLIC REFERENCE
TO THIS AFFILIATION, THEY ARE REPORTEDLY POSTPONING FORMAL
ANNOUNCEMENT OF IT UNTIL COMPLETION OF ELECTIONS IN ONE
CNTF FEDERATION. RELATIONSHIP IS ALREADY UNDER SOME STRAIN
DUE TO BANANA WORKERS' PROTEST STRIKE AGAINST LABOR CODE
CHANGES. END SUMMARY.

1. BANANA WORKERS UNIONS IN CHIRIQUI AND BOCAS DEL TORO
PROVINCES QUIETLY AFFILIATED WITH CNTF, THE COMMUNIST-
DOMINATED NATIONAL LABOR CONFEDERATION, IN NOVEMBER. FORMAL
ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE AFFILIATION IS REPORTEDLY BEING POSTPONED
UNTIL COMPLETION OF ELECTIONS IN FSTRP, AN IMPORTANT
CNTF FEDERATION, WHOSE LEADERSHIP PLAYED AN IMPORTANT
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PAGE 02 PANAMA 00159 071817Z

ROLE IN BRINGING THE BANANA WORKERS IN.

2. MOST OF BANANA WORKERS' MEMBERS ARE EMPLOYEES OF
CHIRIQUI LAND COMPANY, THE LOCAL UNITED FRUIT SUB-
SIDIARY. THE CHIRIQUI AND BOCAS UNIONS ARE AMONG THE
OLDEST, BEST ORGANIZED AND BEST FINANCED UNIONS IN
PANAMA. IN AFFILIATING WITH THE CNTF, THEY HAVE JOINED

TO FORM A NEW FEDERATION OF BANANA WORKERS (FTP).

3. LEADERSHIP OF CHIRIQUI BANANA WORKERS HAS BEEN DOMINATED FOR SOME YEARS BY A GROUP CLOSE TO PANAMANIAN COMMUNIST PARTY (PDP), ALTHOUGH THE UNION HAS NOT PREVIOUSLY BEEN FORMALLY AFFILIATED WITH THE CNTP. BOCAS DEL TORO LEADERSHIP HAD BEEN MORE MODERATE (POLITICALLY, AT LEAST). AT ONE POINT, THE UNION WAS ASSOCIATED IN A NOW-DEFUNCT FEDERATION WITH LOCALS 900 AND 907 AFSCME FROM THE CANAL ZONE WHICH WAS AFFILIATED WITH THE FREE-LABOR CTRP. HOWEVER, GIVEN THE RELATIVELY SELF-CONTAINED NATURE OF THE BANANA OPERATIONS AND THEIR REMOTENESS FROM PANAMA CITY AND COLON, WHERE THE BULK OF PANAMANIAN ORGANIZED LABOR IS CENTERED, BOTH UNIONS HAVE NORMALLY SHOWN LITTLE INTEREST IN NATIONAL LABOR AFFAIRS.

4. ALTHOUGH THE AFFILIATION HAS NOT YET EVEN BEEN FORMALLY ANNOUNCED, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FTB AND CNTP ALREADY SHOWS SOME SIGNS OF STRAIN. BOCAS DEL TORO LEADERSHIP HAS CONTINUED CONTACT WITH CTRP LEADERSHIP, WITH SOME LEADERS FROM BOCAS REPORTEDLY STILL INTERESTED IN SWITCHING TO CTRP, WITH OR WITHOUT CHIRIQUI UNION. ALSO, BANANA WORKERS' STRIKE PROTESTING AMENDMENTS TO LABOR CODE (REFTEL) HAS ADDED TO TENSION. CNTP SECRETARY GENERAL ANGEL GOMEZ HAS COMPLAINED PRIVATELY TO OTHER LABOR LEADERS THAT BANANA WORKERS NEITHER CONSULTED NOR INFORMED CNTP BEFORE STRIKING.

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PAGE 03 PANAMA 00159 071817Z

5. ON JANUARY 6, TALKS BEGAN AT CNTP HEADQUARTERS BETWEEN BANANA WORKERS LEADERS AND LABOR MINISTER AHUMADA AIMED AT SETTLING THE STRIKE. SINCE BANANA WORKERS REPORTEDLY INTENDED TO STAY OUT FOR ONLY THREE DAYS, END OF STRIKE WILL PROBABLY BE ANNOUNCED AFTER THESE MEETINGS END.

6. AFFILIATION OF BANANA WORKERS (IF IT HOLDS UP) WILL PUSH CNTP'S CLAIMED MEMBERSHIP FIGURE OVER 20,000 FOR FIRST TIME, PLACING IT WITHIN EAST STRIKING DISTANCE OF CTRP FOR POSITION AS PANAMA'S LARGEST NATIONAL CONFEDERATION. AS USUAL, MEMBERSHIP FIGURES FOR LABOR ORGANIZATIONS ARE UNRELIABLE. CTRP COULD AS PLAUSIBLY ARGUE THAT IT HAS 25,000 MEMBERS AS CNTP CAN ARGUE THAT IT HAS OVER 20,000.

7. CTRP LEADERSHIP WOULD LIKE TO RECAPTURE SOME OF THE BANANA WORKERS, BUT WITHOUT INCURRING GOP WRATH OR

ENGAGING IN AN OPEN BATTLE WITH CNTP (WHICH IS NORMALLY KEPT SUBMISSIVE TO GOP DESIRES BY ITS COMMUNIST PARTY LEADERSHIP). PROSPECTS ON THIS FRONT ARE FOR AN EXTENDED NIBBLING SIEGE, RATHER THAN A NOISY CAMPAIGN, TO REGAIN INFLUENCE AMONG BANANA WORKERS.

8. COMMENT: WE EXPECT THAT THE BANANA WORKERS' AFFILIATION WITH THE CNTP WILL BE LARGELY NOMINAL, AND WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF THEY SHOULD DECIDE TO GO THEIR OWN WAY AGAIN IN THE NOT-TOO-FAR-DISTANT FUTURE.

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